

Survivor in Chinese Modern Transitions in the Twentieth Century

From the First Peking Opera Film to Modern Play

Jingyuan Yu^{1,*}

¹*Beijing Number Eight High School, Beijing, China*

**Corresponding author: Email:angela@cas-harbour.org*

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author analyzes the change of the Peking Opera during Chinese modern transition in the twentieth century, comparing Peking Opera as the survivor during the dramatic transition. This paper especially focuses on the first Peking Opera Film *Regrets Of Life And Death* and the modern play *The Red Detachment Of Women*, taking them as typical examples. The author intends to know that why people are still able to see the original performance of Peking Opera at present, with young Peking Opera actors learning traditional version of plays meticulously. Through the analysis in this paper, it can be known that people who performed Peking Opera during this transition have made efforts for Peking Opera, so that it can accommodate with the current social norm and popular wave. Although many supporters of traditional plays opposed the change of performances, the changes did survive and attracted more people's attention and interest.

Keywords: *Peking Opera, Modern play, Transition*

1. INTRODUCTION

The future for Peking Opera is in vague due to the increasing diversification of plays. For example, the modern plays form a stark difference with a traditional way of performance. Additionally, the political domination strongly affects the original performance, such as the model play *The Red Detachment Of Women* and *The Mountain of Cuckoo*. However, from a different perspective, although those changes deform Peking Opera to some degree, they do revert the fate of the endangered culture. For instance, Kunqu Opera, as the ancestor of Peking Opera, was not that lucky, because it did not keep the pace with the current society. It was gradually inherited and replaced by Peking Opera. When learning Kunqu, people can hardly get to know the original characters and modes of it, which were not well preserved. Compared with its ancestor, Peking Opera has the quality to be called the survivor, especially in the twentieth century, when China experienced drastic modern transitions. This paper will mostly focus on the first Peking Opera film *Regrets Of Life And Death*, in which Mei Lanfang's refinements and film technologies played essential roles, and the model play *The Red Detachment Of Women* in that the impact of the extreme

political atmosphere. These two plays are like two waves during twentieth century and they have different characteristics. The first wave is more like the refinement, while the second is totally a revolution and this paper will analyze them in detail. The ideology changed dramatically during this period, which also reflected on the two plays, even on Peking Opera performers. In other words, people are able to see the growth of Peking Opera in the history of China, and vice versa.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Comparison between Peking Opera and Kunqu

It is fortunate that Peking Opera, which experiences Chinese modernity, is well preserved nowadays. However, Kunqu Opera, the ancestor of Peking Opera, did not successfully survive and inherited the most essential tradition of Chinese opera to Peking Opera, such as costumes, headwear, and the form of singing while dancing [1]. Then, it dies. From the author's point of view, Kunqu that people see today are not the original version and they are not as fashionable as Peking Opera. It is true that Peking Opera endured a lot during the twentieth

century, but it lived on due to mainly two factors—the introduction of western film culture and technology as well as the sensationalization in the early years since the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

2.2. The Preserved Stage

The innovation of cinematographic art for Peking Opera made this precious culture survive during the western cultural impact period. One of the most renowned Peking Opera performers was Mei Lanfang. Influenced by the western culture, he meant to record the play *Regrets Of Life And Death* by the form of film. However, it was a challenge for him. Mr. Mei once stated that: “It is a difficult but meaningful job to bring Chinese classical dance and dance plays to the screen, something I want to do for many years but have been afraid to do. The completion of the color film *The Regrets Of Life And Death* is a collection of many technical experts, dramatists, writers and critics, with everyone stood on their own posts to try their best. In the process of difficult twists and turns, only experienced people can understand” [2]. It is understandable why Mr. Mei was afraid to try this film. Since in ancient times, performances were shown in the old-styled houses and theaters, where the light condition was not good and people even sat in the front could not see the face of actors clearly. Thus, audience focused more on the melodies than facial expressions of actors and they did not care much about the performance.

However, the screen could show the face of performers as clear as possible. Mr. Mei consequently made changes in his former facial expressions and actions, so that it would be more comfortable for audience to watch. In the beginning of the play, there was an action for pulling out the arrow. Mr. Mei added lying down on the ground to show the painfulness, and pulled out the arrow in an exaggerated way.

In addition, Peking Opera, as a classical and abstract art, must be somewhat accustomed with western realistic art in its film form, meanwhile kept an art full of realism, but not abstract impression. For instance, in an early period, Peking Opera was played on a traditional stage. The front stage extended forward, with three sides that faced audience, and the forth side was the backstage. The curtain hanged across the backstage, and on each side of it was a curtained door for performers to enter or exit the stage. On the stage, props of a decorative nature were placed, usually a table and two chairs, which symbolized the Chinese traditional aesthetics. The stage did not have background, since the gorgeous costumes and abstract performances could fulfill the whole stage. In the twentieth century, with the cultural communication and impact between the east and west opera, the western realism induced in eastern opera stages. The introduction of film, as an art full of realism, influenced the eastern way of performance and stage settings gradually. In the

color film *The Regrets Of Life And Death*, it contained specific backgrounds based on the content of diverse pieces of songs in the play. Some people may argue that those background music destroys the play in that audiences would be attracted by them rather than focused on the melodies and performances. However, on the contrary, Mr. Mei tried to make the film more interesting and he let the photographer change the angle when he performed to show the background to audience. Since there were some melodies with slow tempo in the play, which might take performers a few minutes to sing a sentence or take a few actions, he changed the angle so that it would be displayed more vividly. Audience could have a whole picture of the background and get to know better about the content. What is more, it is suitable for a three-dimensional movie style. The special effects of movie also makes it more lively. In the end of the film, the protagonist Han Yuniang leaned against the window, falling asleep, so that people could feel that she was entering a dream. In general, the original form of Peking Opera has been well preserved, and the descendants can get chances to learn from it [3].

2.3. Theory “moving without changing shape” by Mei Lanfang

Mr. Mei insisted his idea “moving without changing shape”, meaning that the content and main idea of the play can be changed yet conventions, including the technique, should be remained. The “form” proposed by Mr. Mei refers to the artistic rules and unique styles of Peking Opera as his theory is built from his decades of acting practice, and his artistic life is a life of reform and innovation. However, no matter how it changes, one thing remains unchanged, that is, the artistic law of Peking Opera will never be violated and the form of its performing art will never be changed. A few scholars argue that in the color film *Regrets Of Life And Death*, the utilization of realistic background and adjustment of performances are used to cater for the change in prop. For example, the loom that looks much bigger but more realistic was a kind of contradictory [4]. Actually, Mr. Mei intended to make his acting more aesthetic, and it was not a contradiction at all. In the next decades, with the dramatic westernization and transition in policy, people has changed Mr. Mei’s theory gradually.

2.4. Rise of Modern Peking Opera

Peking Opera managed to root deeply in people’s mind due to the sensationalization in the early years of China, though the “left wind” was way strong. In the 1950s and 1960s, the practice of staging only classically lay among Peking Opera troupes. Like other art forms, it was necessary to let images of ordinary workers and peasants become leading roles on the theatrical stage. The idea that art and literature should serve for politics became mainstream thought. The political production

model play such as *The Red Detachment Of Women* successfully absorbed a few powerful leaders, like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Under their mighty influence, people gradually became fan of model Peking Opera, even feeling proud when singing and listening to them. However, at that time, Lu Xun defended traditional Peking Opera plays and actors extremely via writing. He once criticized that Mei Lanfang's voice and performance were obscene and bootless for the lyrics and costumes symbolized conservative and outdated thoughts, which opposed his modern concept uprooted all traditions. Under Lu Xun's influence, this anti-traditional wave of thoughts, was a disastrous impact on traditional Peking Opera undoubtedly.

3. CRITICISM TOWARDS TRADITIONAL PEKING OPERA

Lu Xun, as a proponent of Chinese modernity, contended against the performances and theory put forward by Mei Lanfang. In December, 1926, he wrote an article to criticize Mei Lanfang in a dramatic way so "moving without changing" theory endured a complete impact. People started to reform it into "moving with changing". From then on, Peking Opera had been seen as a tool to work for politics. Unlike the film technology, which was a refinement for Peking Opera, the appearance of model plays can be absolutely called a revolution. In the next decade, performance of all classic Peking Operas was banned. Radio broadcasting that taught singing sections was played day in and day out [5]. Schools often organized performances of sections of the "model plays". The "model plays" became the standard for artistic creation in the country. In addition, they exerted influence over literature, painting, drama, traditional opera, dancing, and music. Lots of artists were subject to persecution during the Cultural Revolution, and some even left the stage forever. Thus the inheritance of traditional Peking Opera was forced to stop.

4. INNOVATIONS IN THE MODEL PLAY THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN

Back to the model play *The Red Detachment Of Women*, violent times brand can be seen from this play. A bold reform was to remove conventions in the performance. Conventions of Peking Opera means that performers have their own rules when acting. "A performer imitates and beautifies life's actions. For example, he opens and closes a door where there is no door at all. This is true of mounting or dismounting a horse, going upstairs or coming downstairs, going on board a ship or leaving a ship. At the same time, movements on the Peking Opera stage should be dance-like and pleasant to look at, and should have a rhythm. This necessitates exaggeration and pantomimic variations. A combination of symbolism and movement-to-graceful dancing conversion has resulted in

conventionalized acting, which is unique to Peking Opera. That is to say, human actions have gradually been adapted for the theatrical stage and fallen into fixed patterns to become intricate conventions that generations of performers are conformed with and audience are familiar with. Conventionalized acting in Peking Opera does not come into existence overnight. It is accumulated by a succession of performers and passed down from generation to generation" [1].

The traditional makeup has also been changed. In the past, every character in each play acquired a unique makeup image, so that audience had the recognition by makeup conventions. However, movements of performers in *The Red Detachment Of Women* were much closer to real life, and the makeup was simplified. For the political demands, protagonists were reverted into workers instead of emperors or people from high classes. Performers were more eager to reflect realism in Peking Opera plays, indicating that people were starting to tear off the ornament of culture. It is just like the feeling in the movie *Thaumatrope*, when people saw themselves on the screen they felt excited. When people feel closer with figures, it is more likely that they could form connections and empathy, which is also easy to install the political ideas to people, especially to women, since the play shows the power and motivation of women in the revolution, helping to activate the cultural imagination of the proletarian revolution.

5. REFORMATION OF PEKING OPERA—“GREAT LEAP FORWARD”

From the author's perspective, the removal of conventions of Peking Opera is a deform for this traditional culture. It is conventions of Peking Opera that make the stark discrimination between mundane life and noble performance on the stage. However, in model plays, audience cannot see them. During the Spring Festival in 1950, Mr. Mei said in his speech that: "I hope our comrades should work hard and be calm, not keep the idea of winning the championship and running off the dock, which will easily affect their life in the future. We should make it clear that the reform movement of opera is not an easy task, but rather arduous. Therefore, I have repeatedly said that we should be bold but careful, down-to-earth, unmoved, and steady". It is obvious that Mr. Mei expressed his concern about the thought of the "Great Leap Forward" in opera form in a subtle and cautious way. He really hoped that the reform could slow down and consolidate the foundation step by step. The demand of fast speed of the "Great Leap Forward" made a huge contradiction with the slow speed of this tradition. In the past, Peking Opera has been passed down through oral instructions and face-to-face teachings, which is a lengthy process and cannot be shaped overnights.

Model plays can only be the political needs for that special periods, but they cannot be the mainstream

afterwards. After “Bring Order Out Of Chaos” in 1978, people’s ideology went back to normal again with their thought more advanced and open. Performers with modern ideas to play Peking Opera, no matter traditional or model plays, is the main goal of modernity of China. It stands for changing people’s mind, thus providing a promising future for Peking Opera.

6. CONCLUSION

The modernity in China symbolizes the maturity of Peking Opera and it experienced bewilderment and failure. However, it becomes a powerful survivor eventually, and people can see its dramatic change from the first Peking Opera film *Regrets Of Life* to modern Peking Opera play *The Red Detachment Of Women*. Currently, Chinese renaissance towards traditional Peking Opera is taking place. The government appeals traditional Peking Opera plays in theaters and provides Peking Opera courses as required in elementary school, so that the original version of Peking Opera can last forever. For this paper, the author only watches a few new modern Peking Opera plays and may not analyze modern elements that comprehensively. In the future, the author would get close attention to new plays so that better comparison with traditional plays can be made.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

The author finished the paper by reading and analyzing the references, and writing the paper individually.

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